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Socio-economic Status and Perceived Social Responsibility

By Jamila Jones

This paper examines the concept of social responsibility, and how social economic status effects how different groups both perceive social responsibility and act on social responsibility. There are many ways in which groups and group identity develop and many interacting levels of systems and social conventions; however for the purpose of this paper the group's focus will be based on socio-economic status as an indicator of social responsibility and social action. A brief overview of group dynamics and altruism will be discussed because these concepts are embedded in the idea of social responsibility and social action. Garfinkel's theory of Social Interaction will be presented, and then applied to the topic of this paper along with a brief analysis including references to activism as a category of social action.

The intent of this paper is to show that people of a lower economic scale and social status will in general be moved to greater social action from the interaction along the many different levels of social systems, constructs, social status and their feelings of social responsibility is greater, than those of higher socio-economic status. The idea of social responsibility has been surprisingly touched upon only lightly in the area sociology (Cole & Stewart, 1996).

Social responsibility has been seen as a paradigm and as such has been researched through the separate concepts of solidarity, altruism and social action. The area of social responsibility research phased out as the era of protest phased out, however in connection and equally important to social responsibility is the concept of group dynamics, and altruistic behavior. Theorists such as Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Erving Goffman have made tremendous insights into how and why groups form, work and interact with the world

around the individual. Garfinkel's contribution is his theory of social interaction and Goffman takes social interaction one step further employing ethnographic methodology to explain person to person interaction and social interaction in public (Goffman, 1963).

The great Civil Rights movements of the 60's and 70's, the war protest in context of Vietnam, the movement to end apartheid are social movements that led people to become involved in issues that generally did not originate in their own specific in-group. Individuals who were not African American, not Africans, or not women became involved in such movements. What led people to become involved in these movements? The idea of what leads people to act altruistic then is also an indicator to how they will manifest social action and the idea of how group perspective can influence the meaning of social responsibility. This paper and its research were motivated by the questions, "what makes a person commit acts of social action? How can

people not just be recruited but *motivated* to make a critical choice to become active in their communities and society as a whole?”

Background

I began with the idea based on personal observations that seemed to indicate that individuals on the lower scale (median income and below) of the socio-economic ladder were more interested in social action, that the ideas surrounding social action were based on grass roots organizations, protests, and policy implementing. These individuals not only seemed to want to get involved, but were more than willing to devote large amounts of time to their “causes” and more willing to advocate ideas based on a sense of shared background/ community. I also noticed that the reverse tended to be true in my observations of people higher up on the socio-economic scale, who tended to reinforce their in-group organizations but tended to stay out of larger conflicts that may or may not have affected others on a larger scale, the social actions of such groups were along the lines of tax donations, fundraising and other clerical duties. The social responsibility towards the in-group was higher than towards others that were not in the in-group.

In a longitudinal study of Indian and Americans’ perceived social responsibility, the research gives a clear picture of how economic status effects the perception of social responsibility. “The results provide evidence that socioeconomic status may have contributed, in part, to the differences in moral reasoning observed among Indian and American subjects in the first study. It was demonstrated that in the stranger condition, middle-class Hindu Indian adults categorized the low-need issues in moral terms

significantly less frequently than did lower-class Hindu Indian adults. Such trends imply that higher socioeconomic status may be associated with a change in orientation toward social responsibilities, from a moral to a personal-choice perspective” (Bersoff, Harwood, & Miller, 1990).

Group dynamics can be seen as generally the study of power relationships within groups between group members, how individuals go about defining and re-defining groups, the group’s influence over the individual, and the interaction of groups. Group dynamics, as a field of research, looks at such topics as: group goals, membership perception, and group cohesion. I address group dynamics because individual interaction among group members may account for motivational factors of an individual. Information on group context is needed to understand the effect that group illusions, solidarity and commitment has on the motivation of an individuals action and/ behaviors.

Altruistic behavior, “Included in this definition of altruism is prosocial behavior motivated by the desire to adhere to internalized principles” (Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, Speer, 1991), is also an important facet of social responsibility, because the concept and actions of social responsibility can range from a tax deductible donation to an organization within one’s in-group or to enlightened altruistic behavior like joining the peace corp. or some equally diverse group, that tends to re-define your in-group as the whole of humanity. It is here that we can ask, “How do community values affect the individual’s attitudes toward social action, how do those values affect the perception of so-

cial responsibility” (Beck, 1999). Altruistic behavior can be seen as existing on a scale where at one end there is “exhibit[ion] of altruistic behavior only within the confines” of one’s group to “enlightened” altruism, which is a universal, where some key aspects can be observed such as the rescuers’ respect for human life (Beck, 1999).

“Few researchers would now argue that persons with an altruistic personality are more prosocial in all contexts. Rather, consistent with the prevailing contemporary perspectives on personality (Romer, Gruder, & Lizzadro, 1986; Snyder & Ickes, 1985), those who support the notion of an altruistic personality have suggested that there is a person-situation interaction in regard to altruistic tendencies. However, there has not been consensus in regard to the situations in which altruistic tendencies are evident. ...there is considerable evidence for an association between situational sympathy and prosocial behavior [(see Batson, 1987; Eisenberg & Fabes, 1989; Eisenberg & Miller, 1989; Schroeder, Dovidio, Sibicky, Matthews, & Allen, 1988)” Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer (1991).] This quote illustrates that even the concept of altruism is complex and dynamic. An individual’s expression of altruism can be situational, and that an individual who acts altruistically in one situation and context will not necessarily behave in the same manner in all situations across the board. So perhaps an individual who acts on behalf of another individual in a prosocial manner is only doing so because the context of that particular situation puts both persons in the same in-group. Applying that argument to this paper, I argue that a person in a lower socioeconomic status will be more likely

to either extend their in-group definitions to more people globally, so again altruism is more likely; or that people within that socioeconomic level are more apt to behaving in a prosocial manner because of solidarity and its ability to produce empathy and vice versa. Social responsibility can be summed up as the feeling of obligation to one’s group and the feeling and strength of solidarity connecting an individual to her/his group.

Emile Durkheim’s ideal of group solidarity, which can also be seen as cohesiveness, focuses on the fact that solidarity must be from a shared emotional feeling. These concepts were the basis for the idea of collective consciousness, belonging, all leading up to moral obligation towards one another. This group identity provides guidelines for moral codes. The main task of Durkheim was to show how moral feelings underlie social order (Collins & Makowsky, 2005). Weber’s ideal of sociology (Collins & Makowsky, 2005) is based on three concepts: stratification, power, and status. Stratification is the power that moves society and is comprised of three interrelating parts one of which is economics. Each order enables a unique perspective world view and the basis for who constitutes in-group members. Weber states that status is developed based on the interrelating parts of stratification and that economics give people distinct interest and will shape how we will see the world and act.

Karl Marx’s theory also bears an importance to both Weber and Durkheim’s theories. Marx’s sociology was centered on class conciseness and class conflict. Marx’s concept of class is of import to this essay because it is tied into status as

defined by Weber and is also a social philosophy of how economic class status determines an individual's interest. Property division and therefore economics marked the breaking lines in social structure. In obligatory instances classes would then form a strong sense of solidarity and group themselves in accordance to their socio-economic status. Marx states "people do not have an objective view of the world; they see it from the restricted point of view of their own positions" (Collins & Makowsky, 2005).

This section has given a brief overview of the concepts such as group dynamics, altruism and group solidarity and how each of these concepts spring from different but complementary schools of thought that are influenced by classical theorist Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. The next section will give a brief overview of what is theory; the methodology employed by the theorist Harold Garfinkel, and Irving Goffman, as well as an overview of their individual theories.

Theory

Before an attempt can be made to familiarize one with the primary theorist of this paper, the definition of what a theory is should be made clear. According to the Webster's Dictionary, "theory is a more or less verified or established explanation accounting for known facts or phenomena; a coherent group of propositions or statements used as principles of explanation for a class of phenomena." An explanation of methodology is needed because of the introduction of Harold Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology, his unique style of methodology that has spanned into numerous professions other than pertaining to the social sciences.

Methodology as defined by Webster's Dictionary is a "set or system of methods, principals, and rules for regulating a given discipline, as in the arts and sciences."

An attempt to view what constitutes social action and responsibility can be seen as an attempt to analyze the process in which two or more social actors reciprocally influence each other, this interaction can be within the in-group, or as group interactions, this is what social interaction is. Social interaction has been commonly referred to as microsociology. Social interaction can be viewed as a link between the individual and society. Social interaction is the medium that culture and society directly influence individuals and how individuals then on a collective level then produce and reproduce the same social arrangements. This link can come across in person to person contact or a varied aspect of media.

Social interaction is prevalent in almost all theories of the social world; however the emphasis social interaction receives is varied (Cahill, 2005). The background of social interaction as a theory in its own right can be traced to Harold Garfinkel. Garfinkel largely debated Talcott Parsons view of social order based on individual's relationships to institutional beliefs and values.

Garfinkel focused on the importance of situational constraints and the affect that those constraints have on the individual, and therefore their behavior. Garfinkel is seen largely as taking on the task of furthering Emile Durkheim's task of showing that social practices is a major component of social order (Rawls, 2005).

Garfinkel is largely associated with Erving Goffman's interactionism because of

the impact Garfinkel's methodological (Ethnomethodology) approach had on social interaction (Richard, 2005). Erving Goffman analyzed social interaction as a focus on the "dramatic character of its definitional dynamics and its ritual order or structure" (Cahill, 2005). To once again illustrate the background to social interactionalism we see that researchers who have followed Goffman's lead have demonstrated in a variety of ways the social glue that Durkheim called collective ideas/ thought, and sentiments. Each encounter an individual has that goes beyond the fleeting and ritualistic creates what Durkheim called collective identification, and fellow feeling (Cahill, 2005).

Application of Theory

Socio-economic status is the situational constraint that affects the individual and therefore their behavior in line with the idea of social interaction. The social interaction that goes on between individuals and groups, go into building group solidarity at which fellow feeling or emotional/ shared consciences is an underlying factor. Applying social interactionism, social responsibility is then an outgrowth of these feelings of group solidarity, group identity and obligations towards one group.

Group boundaries can and are often defined and redefined in ways based on factors that seem insignificant such as favorite color to favorite sports team to factors of extreme importance/ impact such as individuals supporting their countries involvement and position in a war. The group boundaries here are social economic class. Where economics then dictate what class status one has and social class often puts an economic label upon an individual and group.

Within the social stratification the economics within those groups focuses on who and how an individual will react to their in-group members and out-group members, and shapes their perception of their world and their obligations. This interaction is the basis for solidarity which is in turn shapes the perception of social responsibility, what it is and how much obligation an individual has to their group. Here the civil rights movement is a good example. The majority of the members of the black power movement, thought not all, shared common social status in the view of the world and the economics within this particular group was generally regulated to the lower end of the economic spectrum. The ties that bound the individuals of the civil rights movement and the black power movement were their perceived social status in relation to others in the U.S. and the generally lower economic situation that African Americans were regulated to by class. This is by no means a statement to indicate that these two factors were the only two items that bound these groups together. We can see time and time again the mobilization forces of ethnic groups such as Hispanic/ Latinos, or other groups based in social activism. The interaction of members within this particular group reinforce the feeling of solidarity and the obligation of social responsibility, this is then (in part) what propels an individual to social action. The social action an individual takes depends on the group concept of what is social responsibility which is in turn depends on the social economic class.

Social action can be examined by looking at social activism. An example to analyze is the Anti-Apartheid movement. Here you see members of a certain

socio-economic group, whose social movement does not confine itself to the boundaries of South Africa or America but had the ability to become a global group and movement. This was because of a shared sense of humanity and fellow feeling within this group which allowed through social interaction the group's goals to be communicated to others outside of the initial group of lower social economic status. Looking at the group disposition of lower socio-economics status and all that the membership in that group entails, one can see how obligation to the group and its concerns will tend to lead members of that group to social activism where social action is needed. It was not enough to effect change and achieve a group goal of equality for the apartheid movement, to simply state their dislike of the social institution of apartheid or even enough (on the group level) to merely advocate on the behalf the local citizens of South Africa, instead the group and individuals within the group because of their status, which infers a lack of resources as well, must be devote more time, and be devoted to the "cause".

Another example is a study conducted by Cole and Stewart (1996) based on political participation of white women and black women to form an idea about political identity and social responsibility. The research looked at mid-life political participation and found three variables or indicators of later socio-political involvement, they were: political identity, power discontent and social responsibility. The researchers postulated that the civil rights movement and women's movement would have different meanings for women within each group and hence a different impact on the social groups the individuals were apart of.

"First, theory and research in social psychology indicate that a central mechanism through which social movements mobilize is the creation of a collective identity that not only enlarges individual identity but also connects the participant to the social group, cementing his or her commitment (Gamson, 1992). When individuals share a common identity, and hence a sense of common fate with a group, they act to protect group interests" (Cole & Stewart, 1996). This illustrates how individuals within groups form a group identity leading to a feeling of solidarity and obligation.

Cole & Stewart (1996) illustrate what a socially responsible personality is; "Such people are concerned with social and moral issues, are committed to working for the good of groups rather than just for personal gain, and have a sense of trust in society in general", and how this personality type is prevalent among individuals who are activist or participate in activism; the concept of the socially responsible personality can be viewed as an operational definition of an Altruistic personality as well. The research has then been able to illustrate altruistic tendencies of individuals who tend to gravitate toward social activism and how group identity is achieved and imbues a unique sense of what is social responsibility. Cole & Stewart (1996) go on to connect the group's perception of social responsibility and what can constitute appropriate social action, "Perhaps most importantly, they may be described as having a strong sense of community; they are active participants in their communities, representing the antithesis of the alienated citizen."

The methods employed by the researchers included interviews, self reporting, and questionnaires with scoring. It should be stated as with any research, there are possible outliers of such research. Whenever research relies on self reporting, as well as with interviews too heavily this can cause problems as people are prone to forget, and there may be an issue of shame, and the fact that our memories tend to bias; with all these possible barriers, I find that the research was conducted well, and if any such situations occurred, they did so in a minimal and negligible extent.

Conclusion

Perceived social responsibility is shaped by social economic status as a predictor of social action because in groups boundaries based on the socio economic status will form a high level of solidarity with in the group and that perspective is how and why they develop their social mores. The social activist movements such as the Anti- Apartheid movement were massive activism campaigns and they illustrate how, through group and individual interaction, the perception of what is social responsibility and how social action is carried out. Such conclusions can be drawn from other examples as well, such as the Latino community organizing against proposition 108 in California, the activism of the “Not in Our Name Coalition”, and in the Anti War movement of the Vietnam era. This paper in the end raises some questions: simply put, what happened to the sons and daughters of the revolution? Where did the culture of activism go? In a society that instills an “us” versus “them” mentality, how does this change our communities its values and youth entering into the political sphere. There is a movement on the rise for corporate

social responsibility, how likely, given the position of corporations, is such a movement even viable? Individuals with lower socio-economic status are more likely to be involved in social action stemming from the moral and collective feeling of social responsibility with which their status has imbued them. Therefore the lower an individual is on the socio-economic scale, the more likely there will be a need for social action, and the more one has to become entrenched in activism and become more committed to social action. The lower that an individual is on the socio-economic scale the more likely the individual’s identity will be rooted in a broader sense of social responsibility and the stronger the obligation towards that social responsibility becomes.

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